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What are the experiences of cancer care in gay, lesbian and bisexual patients, and how do these differ from heterosexual cancer patients?

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BACKGROUND: Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) people frequently experience inequality within healthcare, and are an underserved population in cancer research. Population level experiences of cancer are monitored through administration of the National Cancer Patient Experience Survey (NCPES).

AIMS: We undertook secondary analysis of 2013 NCPES data to explore cancer experiences in LGB people.

METHODS: 68,737 people responded (68%), included a representative spread of demographic (gender, age, UK locality) and clinical (including common and rarer disease) factors. 568 participants (0.9%) identified their sexual orientation as LGB. Response differences were analysed using multivariate logistical regression.

RESULTS: Bisexual respondents reported a less positive pathway to diagnosis, less satisfactory side-effect management, and less satisfactory relationships with nurse specialists. Bisexual, gay and lesbian patients reported poorer after-care and support provision, and that they were more likely to be dealing with cancer without family/friend input. Gay and Lesbian respondents reported that they weren't treated with dignity and respect. Similarly, bisexual respondents reported that they were treated as "a set of symptoms" rather than a whole person.

CONCLUSIONS: LGB respondents perceived a poorer overall cancer experience. Much of this relates to communication and relationships with healthcare professionals and may be influenced by heteronormativity and perceived homophobia; differences may result from higher care expectations, or represent genuine inequality. LGB respondents were coping alone, without family/friend input or adequate formal psychosocial support provision. Further research is needed to understand these differences better, though training for healthcare professionals is likely to be key to improving cancer experiences in this group.